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ABSTRACT

Ageism (unfair stereotyping of older adults), deeply embedded in the culture of 20th-century America, is reinforced by television and newspapers. The media depict old people as rigid, meddlesome, sexless, conservative, unhealthy, and forgetful. Most pernicious of all old age stereotypes is that of second childhood. Popular culture portrays children and old people together as though they have personality characteristics in common. In advertisements, old people are given the personalities, dress, physical problems, playthings, and activities of children. Drug advertisements portray them as throwing tantrums, greeting cards depict them dressed in children's clothes, and one laxative advertisement praises an older woman's regularity by implying that she is a "good girl." Unfortunately, such identification with children lowers the social status of old people and robs the "gray power" movement of adults who might otherwise work for political change and social betterment. Clearly, efforts need to be made to change the media's demeaning portrayal of old age. (Author/KC)

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"Second Childhood"

Arnold Arluke, Jack Levin

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

There is an extreme and unremitting bias against older adults in America, a bias so prevalent that it has been given the name "ageism" (Butler, 1968). Psychologically, ageism can be regarded as an attitude — a negative evaluation that serves to orient individuals toward old people as a group. In particular, it frequently predisposes individuals to discriminate, that is, to avoid contact, victimize, or otherwise do injury to old people based on their age status alone. Ageism is also a tendency to stereotype old people — which is, of course, another form of injury. We picture them as rigid, meddlesome, sexless, conservative, unhealthy, inactive, lonely, forgetful and not very bright (Levin and Levin, 1980).

Many stereotypes portray old age as a time of second childhood. This dim view of the elderly suggests that they are losing, or have lost, the very things a growing child gains. It implies a backward movement to earlier developmental stages, with no recognition of the lifetime of experience that unquestionably separates the elderly from children (Gresham, 1973).

The image of old people as child-like has been with us for a long time. Tuckman and Lorge (1953) asked graduate students in psychology to indicate their agreement or disagreement with a number of statements about old people. Despite the fact that their subjects were well acquainted with psychology and enrolled in a course involving the aging process, there was a high level of agreement that old people like to collect many useless things, are unproductive, are poorly coordinated, cannot taste differences in foods, have to go to bed early, need a nap every day, are in the "happiest" period of their lives, cannot manage their own affairs, and are in their second childhood.

More recent research indicates that stereotyping continues to be an integral part of public images of the aged, and that a major thrust of this stereotyping still perpetuates the second childhood image. McTavish (1971) found considerable acceptance of an image of old people that is distinctly reminiscent of the toddler image known as "the terrible two's." Many of his subjects felt that old people are likely to be annoying, complaining, and inconsiderate. In 1975, the National Council on the Aging reported the results of a Harris Survey of 4,254 adult Americans. Old people were generally thought of as useless and inactive by participants in the survey. Subjects agreed that the elderly spend most of their time watching television or "doing nothing" in the true spirit of directionless adolescence.

Youth and age... the historical turnaround:

Our society has not always mistreated or stereotyped its old people. In Colonial America it was youth who encountered ageism. According to Fischer (1977), aged Americans living 200 years ago commanded inordinate respect, power and privilege. Under Puritanism, old age was regarded as a sign of election and a special gift from God. In their dress and hair styles, early Americans frequently tried to make themselves out to be older than they really were. Men would hide their natural hair beneath a wig, or they would powder their own hair to give it a white color associated with advancing age. Until the nineteenth century, the census-taker frequently found that citizens represented themselves as older than they actually were. Today's census-taker finds misrepresentations of age too, but in the opposite direction.

During the nineteenth century the privileged status of old age began to deteriorate as America modernized. First, as levels of literacy and education increased, there was less reliance on the older generation as a source of knowledge. Since the young became better educated, they began to hold a competitive edge with respect to jobs, status and power. This led, second, to a retirement that reduced the standard of living and social status of the aged. Third, the nuclear family became more prevalent, so that older members of society were expected to live apart in independent households or to seek care. And finally, in the shift from agriculture to industry, older members of society lost control over land and were forced instead to compete with younger persons for nonagricultural positions.

By the twentieth century, ageism had become a cultural phenomenon — part of the normative order of our society. As such it was passed from generation to generation through the process of socialization much like other cultural phenomena — love of country and church, motherhood, the success ethic and so forth. The result is that there is now widespread acceptance of ageism crosscutting differences in age, region, social class and occupation. Studies have recorded

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agreement with age stereotypes not only among groups of physicians, nurses, ministers and middle-age children of aged parents, but also among institutionalized older persons themselves and even gerontologists!

Ageism on TV and in the press:

Since ageism is so prevalent in society at large, it is hardly surprising to find ageism in a popular culture which expresses and, in turn, transmits age prejudice. Television, in particular, has consistently assigned negatively stereotyped roles to the aged when it has not ignored the aged altogether. As revealed in his study of characters appearing in prime-time network television drama, Aronoff (1974) reports that the aged comprised less than five percent of all characters, about half of the proportion that they actually occupied in the population of the United States at the time of his study. When they did appear as dramatic, the aged tended to be depicted as evil, unsuccessful and unhappy. Television commercials have similarly ignored or stereotyped the aged. One study found that only 2 out of 100 television commercials contained older characters (Francher, 1973). The focus of attention was on the "Pepsi Generation" —young and attractive characters who were featured in order to promise youthful appearance or behavior.

Newspapers are little better than television in their treatment of the elderly. According to MacDonald's 1973 analysis of 265 articles on the subject of aging, all appearing in a large midwestern newspaper, old people who are still active in their communities are ignored. The newspaper focus is largely on the *problems* of old age or the mere "human interest" side, which features retirees graduating from college at seventy-five or reminiscing about the "good old days."

Age stereotypes characterize the portrayal of old people in prescription drug advertisements as well. Smith (1976) found aged models in drug ads frequently described solely on the basis of old age as disruptive, apathetic, temperamental and out of control.

Even birthday cards perpetuate age stereotypes. A study by Demos and Jache (1981) found contemporary birthday cards often depicting old age as a time of physical, sexual and intellectual decline.

"Second Childhood" — Six ways of derogating the elderly:

Most pernicious, perhaps, of all age stereotypes is that of "second childhood." It is certainly the most widely represented in popular culture. There are at least six ways in which second childhood is portrayed:

- Children and old people paired with each other.
- Old people are given the personalities of children.
- Old people are given the dress of children.
- Old people are shown to have childhood's physical problems.
- Old people are given the activities and playthings of children.
- The role of old people is reversed so that they themselves become the children of middle-age parents: that is, *children of their own children.*

The ubiquitousness of the "second childhood" stereotype — its almost inescapable presence throughout the media — becomes apparent when we examine each of the six common forms of portrayal, in turn.

Children and old people are paired with each other. A TV commercial for "Country-Time Lemonade" shows an elderly man with children gathered round him as he claims that this tastes as good to him as lemonade did when he was young. A Dairy Mart commercial shows an old man and young boy floating along in a small boat enjoying their idle time. A magazine ad for Yashica cameras has an old man snapping pictures of a small girl holding a stuffed dog, while an ad for the prescription drug "Isuprel" features an old man blowing bubbles as a young girl sits on his lap and watches him intently.

One seemingly favorable interpretation of these juxtapositions of age and youth is that children and the elderly share a special bond and that such pairing need not suggest that old people are childlike. Yet the equally plausible interpretation — and the tone of the ads heavily leans this way —is that they both have a lot of personality characteristics in common!

Some pairings of children and elders are not so subtle. They clearly suggest the second childhood image of old age. Note the 1979 movie *Just You and Me, Kid* co-starring teenager Brooke Shields and elder George Burns. Newspaper ads showed the two stars playing stick-up and described the film as "the story of two *juvenile* delinquents." In an article called "The Fun Life for Young and Old," the *Boston Globe* provided "a guide to August activities *for senior citizens and children.*" Pictures were shown of a puppet show and a magic act! Even the "Kiddies' Menu" of a popular Massachusetts ice cream parlor portrays an older man walking hand-in-hand with a young boy. As clearly stated on the face of the menu, "for all kids under 10 and over 65," the bill of fare consists of a "hot doggie," "kiddie burger," and "peanut butter and jelly samwhich."

Old people are given the personality and moods of children. It is common in prescription drug ads to describe the symptoms of senility in terms normally associated with the personality and behavior of children. A "Mellaril" ad "for the agitated geriatric" shows an elderly man angrily waving his fist. "TANTRUMS" is printed large across the page. Other drug ads for senility use terms such as "nuisance," "torment," "disruptive," "obstreperous," and "disorderly behavior," to describe elderly behavior. The recent children's book, *How Does It Feel to Be Old?* also implies a delinquent side of the aged personality. At one point, the elderly woman who is explaining to a young girl what it is like to be old compares herself to a "demon" who is "cranky." Television shows and movies characterize the personality of older people as childlike whether it is "Mother Jefferson's" cantankerousness, the silliness of Johnny Carson's "Aunt Blabby," or the impulsiveness and recklessness of Ruth Gordon in *Harold and Maude.*

Old people are given the dress and appearance of children. On the cover of one birthday card is a blackboard with "You're only young once!" chalked on it along with various doodles. Inside, an overweight, unshaven elderly man smoking a cigar is wearing a summer camp tee shirt, shorts, sneakers and cap and is playing with a yo-yo and baseball bat. Above his grinning face the card says "Happy Birthday, Playboy." Clearly, the card suggests that you can be young twice —so young that "playboy" literally refers to the old man playing in his summer camp outfit. Equally childlike

is an ad in *Esquire* showing an elderly woman dressed in a football helmet and varsity sweater playing an electronic football game.

Old people are given the physical problems of children. One ad for catheters, which appears in a *geriatric* nursing journal, shows the forearms and hands of a *baby* as its model instead of an elder. The caption below notes that at "Delmed, we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings." (Sic!) A prescription drug ad for the stool-softener "Doxidan" features a smiling bifocaled older woman. The text reads: "*Minnie moved her bowels today. The day started right for Minnie. That young doctor feller gave her Doxidan to take last night. And it worked!...Minnie figures she's got the smartest doctor in town.*" It is not too farfetched to imagine that Minnie's smile not only expresses her physical relief but also her pride at being told she moved her bowels. Then again, on the cover of one birthday card is a large bottle of "Milk of Magnesia" wrapped in a bright red bow. Above the bottle the card says "Aging." On opening the card, the message reads: "...age is nature's way of telling us to wear looser underwear. May your birthday be anything but regular." One image suggested by this card is that of an elder in diapers!

Old people are given the activities and playthings of children. Parties for old people are characterized as children's parties. In a suburban small town newspaper, a recent article reported that the patients at a local nursing home "Held their *very own* Christmas party." The article went on to indicate that patients "planned the party, made the invitations, decorated the cookies made by the chef, and took part in the entertainment, which included group singing of Christmas Carols." The article thanked a local drugstore for supplying "Santa's gifts." The intentions were admirable, but the message rang loud and clear: Old people are like big children! Posters in a popular chain of fast-food restaurants urge customers to "Have a Senior Birthday Party at McDonald's." For the "birthday kid" who is "young at heart," McDonald's offers to provide the cake, hats, and party favors. Also consider Bell Telephone's ad for its custom phones which can be given as gifts to "celebrate any occasion." One such occasion is "Gertrude's" retirement party, complete with colorful ribbons and balloons. In honor of her retirement, Gertrude is shown receiving her own Snoopy phone from her co-workers. A similar Bell Telephone ad shows an elder receiving a Mickey Mouse phone at a party.

Even the "play" of elders is depicted to imply that they are children. A department store ad in *TV Guide* shows an elderly man riding a child's three wheeler. The caption reads: "Wish they had Hot Cycles when I was a kid... Yep, kids sure are lucky today. Hey, maybe when no one's around..." "Haldol," a prescription drug used to treat symptoms associated with organic brain syndrome, claims in an ad that it "Usually leaves the disturbed elderly patient in the nursing home more alert, more responsive." The photograph of an elderly woman shows her smiling limply and holding a large red and white checked cloth flower. Above her is the caption: "I made a flower today." A similar arts-and-crafts portrayal of the aged appears in a "Roniacol" ad, a drug used to improve circulation. Three elders who are "deficient in peripheral circulation" but "proficient in the 'home'" are shown hard at work making clay pots.

The role of old people is reversed. Popular culture frequently portrays old people as the children of middle-age parents. The *Boston Globe* recently ran an article on "Foster Care for the Elderly" which included a photograph of a "foster elder" standing in his room. What particularly stresses the role reversal is the caption under the photo-

graph. It notes that "Joe Dionne lives with a family in Charlton. *He helps with their chores and joins their trips.*" On one television program, a comedian told the following story: "A small boy was sitting at a curb crying. An old man passed by and kindly asked, 'Why are you crying, Sonny?' 'Because I can't do what the big boys do.' So the old man sat down and cried too." On TV's popular series, *The Rockford Files*, star James Garner frequently gets his aging father, "Rocky," out of trouble.

We can also observe role reversal in prescription drug ads. In an ad for "Hydergine," an older woman is shown suffering "gray area" symptoms such as confusion, lack of self-care, dizziness, moodiness and unsociability. Large print superimposed over her face reads: "I got lost — lost in my own neighborhood... Yesterday I was going to the grocery store...and suddenly didn't know the way. I was all mixed up...I thought it was the old neighborhood. It frightened me — and it's not the first time. My children say it's my second childhood. It's not fair, I took care of them as kids...Please, doctor ...What's happening to me?" Similarly, an ad for "Pneumovax," an anti-pneumonia vaccine, shows an elderly man at his birthday party. Noticeably taller are a middle-age man and woman who are throwing the party for their aged father just as they would for their children who are also in the picture. Like the baby held by the elderly man, the caption reads "Grandpa's a year older."

Casting old people as children has detrimental effects on old and young alike. The "second childhood" stereotype tends to make young people feel distant from their elders. Having just graduated from childhood, what adolescent wants to endure it again by associating with the old? The stereotype may well also encourage gerontophobia, the neurotic fear of old age. How many adults want to be thought of one day as a six-year-old who has nothing to do but play with yo-yos, or as a cranky two-year-old who isn't toilet trained?

"Old and childish" — the self-fulfilling prophecy:

For old people, the second-childhood stereotype creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: After being socialized from an early age, many elderly people come to accept the second-childhood stereotype and play the infantilized role with enthusiasm. But is that because they fail to see any alternative? Our society has traditionally offered certain rewards to those elderly citizens who are willing to "stay in their place." Riding on a special bus for senior citizens, or dancing with other seniors to the tune of Yankee Doodle, may isolate elderly people. But it may be preferable to watching re-runs of "Marcus Welby."

Acting like children has three negative consequences for old people. First, such behavior lowers their social status because their individual responsibility has been diminished, while their dependency has increased. Secondly, the perception of infantile behavior in the elderly may allow certain things to be done to them that would otherwise not be considered: the prescription of psychoactive medications, institutionalization, and declaration of legal incompetency. Thirdly, infantilization robs the "gray power" movement of adults who might otherwise work for political change and social betterment.

But not all old people buy the second-childhood stereotype. A large number of elderly Americans are thoroughly offended by infantilization and seek to avoid the consequences of the stereotype. For many, this means making efforts to "pass" for middle-age by dying hair, lying about their age, and using youth-oriented cosmetics. A positive form of avoidance is reengagement, whereby old people seek to become either reemployed or remarried after the loss of a job or spouse. On the damaging side, an unknown number of cases of apparent senility (organic brain dysfunction) may actually represent a refusal to accept the second-childhood syndrome. Rather than comply, some elders may retreat into a more comfortable, more secure psychological state which ironically has the appearance of infantile behavior. So, for example, we might see lack of sexual interest, giddiness, forgetfulness, inability to maintain a stable relationship, and lack of control over bodily functions.

In contrast to mere avoidance, a growing number of elderly people have become aggressive in their response to attempts to infantilize them. This aggressive reaction seeks not to deny the second-childhood stereotype but to eliminate it. When the readers of *Retirement Living* magazine were asked to choose from a list of twelve words those that most accurately describe the way Americans over 60 are portrayed on television, their top three choices were 'ridiculous,' 'decrepit,' and 'childish' (Hemming and Ellis, 1976). The Gray Panther's Media Watch Task Force is an important example of an organized effort to improve media images of the elderly in general and to eliminate the second-childhood stereotype in particular.

Clearly, efforts ought to be made to change the media's demeaning handling of old age. Yet it must be remembered that the "problem" does not lie just with the media. Take, for example, the Kellogg's Rice Krispies ad which shows an elderly man and woman posed in a romantic embrace. The caption reads: "It's a perfect night for sparkin' on the front swing. For love that's still young." Aside from the ageist reference to young love, the Rice Krispies ad seems to go thoughtfully out of its way to avoid depicting older people as stereotypes. Indeed, they are portrayed in an activity — lovemaking — which although commonly associated with young adults is nonetheless not to be denied their elders as well.

Yet frustratingly, the problem is not thereby solved. The media in this case, via the Rice Krispies ad, has treated the aged with dignity. But readers' responses to the ad — "Aren't they cute! Aren't they sweet!" — are exactly those with which those same readers would greet the inappropriate behavior of children attempting to act like adults. Ageism is so deeply ingrained in our culture that an audience may interpret even the noblest ad to conform to its ageist predispositions. There are times in our studies of this ageist phenomenon when it seems like a no-win situation. But the fullness of life is at stake not alone for the elderly now, but also for those who will be elderly before they know it. □

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